



Vision: A world where women & men farmers play decisive roles in ARD for sustainable livelihoods

In several countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe, diverse organisations joined forces to promote local innovation processes in ecological agriculture and natural resource management. After analysing their own experiences in agricultural research and development, they formed multistakeholder Country Platforms, designed their own programmes and agreed on international activities for mutual learning and policy dialogue. Thus, a community of practice was built from the bottom up, initially as a Global Partnership Programme under the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) umbrella, and remains a vibrant community of practice to this day.

Prolinnova is an NGO-initiated international network promoting local innovation processes in ecological agriculture and natural resource management (NRM). It focuses on recognising the dynamics of local knowledge and enhancing capacities of small-scale farmers (including pastoralists, fishers and forest dwellers) to adapt to change – to develop their context-relevant systems and institutions to manage resources so as to gain food security, sustain their livelihoods and safeguard the environment. The key to sustainability lies in their capacity to innovate.

The network builds on and scales up farmer-led approaches to participatory development that start with finding out how farmers create new and better ways of doing things. Understanding the rationale behind local innovation transforms how researchers and advisors view and interact with farmers. This stimulates mutual interest to work together in a process that integrates local and scientific knowledge.

How it all started

The idea of Prolinnova started in 1999, when NGOs in the Global South and North – supported by GFAR, the CGIAR NGO Committee & the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs – met in France to explore how to scale up participatory approaches to agricultural research and development (ARD) based on local initiatives. Participants asked ETC Foundation, a Dutch NGO, to help build the network from country level. Asian and African NGOs facilitated multistakeholder design of Country Platforms (CPs) to promote farmer-led research and innovation, to facilitate multistakeholder partnerships to explore the potential of local innovations and to share them, and to institutionalise a participatory innovation development (PID) approach within agricultural research, advisory services and education.

Participatory design of the global network

In 2003–04, organisations engaged in ARD in Ghana, Ethiopia and Uganda – supported by IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) – jointly analysed in-country experiences in identifying local innovation and promoting PID, and planned PID up-scaling. From 2004, the Dutch Government partly funded the 3 CPs and supported similar processes in Cambodia, Nepal, Niger, South Africa (SA), Sudan &

Tanzania. In 2006, the network expanded to include Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal. Later, groups in still more countries in Africa, Asia, Andes & Europe joined.

Prolinnova seeks to:

- demonstrate the effectiveness of farmer-led participatory innovation for sustainable development
- build partnerships of farmers, advisors, development agents, scientists and others in agricultural innovation
- enhance capacities of farmers, scientists and advisors in participatory approaches to research and development
- develop decentralised funding mechanisms that give farmers more influence over formal research & extension
- engage in policy dialogue to create an enabling environment for farmer-led research and innovation processes
- set up platforms for reflection, analysis and learning about promoting local innovation processes
- integrate participatory approaches to farmer-led innovation into institutions of research, extension and learning.

Activities differ between CPs depending on history, experience and self-identified capacities. However, common elements include:

- identifying and documenting local innovation
- bringing farmers, advisors and scientists together to plan and implement joint experiments, starting from community-prioritised local innovations;
- creating multistakeholder platforms in the country to learn about and mainstream the PID approach;
- building capacities to identify and document local innovation and to engage in PID, through training workshops for farmers, advisors and scientists;
- engaging in participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of joint activities, outcomes and impacts;
- creating awareness and influencing policy through innovation fairs, publications, mass media and dialogue with policymakers in research, extension & education to create enabling conditions for PID.

Structure of the decentralised network

In each country, normally an NGO is secretariat for a CP governed by a **Steering Committee (SC)** with members from research, extension, education, NGOs, farmer groups and the private sector. The SC defines

CP activities, gives strategic guidance and helps mobilise resources. A core team coordinates activities.

Subregional/regional platforms have formed in West & Central Africa, Eastern & Southern Africa and Asia for mutual learning and joint advocacy.

An **International Support Team (IST)** supports the network's activities through capacity strengthening, mentoring, policy dialogue, information management, networking and publishing. Agrecol Association for AgriCulture & Ecology in Germany is the Northern Focal Point of the international network.

The **Prolinnova Oversight Group (POG)**, elected by the CPs & IST, serves as governance mechanism to ensure accountability to the CPs and the donors.

Prolinnova Oversight Group (POG)

- **Basanta Rana Bhat**, Nepal (Asia)
- **Birgit Habermann**, Austria/Kenya (independent)
- **Brigid Letty**, South Africa (IST)
- **Ernest Letsoalo**, South Africa (Eastern & Southern Africa)
- **Franklin Avornyo**, Ghana (West & Central Africa)
- **Jony Jos**, India (independent – farmer organisation)
- **Lisa van Dijk**, UK (independent)
- **Mutizwa Mukute**, Zimbabwe (independent)
- **Peter Gubbels**, Canada/Ghana (independent)

The POG meets quarterly by Zoom and sometimes physically. It has drawn up several network guidelines.

Participatory learning and mentoring

Starting in 2004 in Ethiopia, International Partners Workshops (**IPWs**) were held annually for social learning within the network. CPs take turns hosting the IPW, often focused on a special theme and including farmer innovators and other stakeholders. Participatory planning at international level mirrors the approach at national and grassroots level: partners develop their programme based on self-defined needs & interests.

Since 2018, IPWs alternate with (sub)regional workshops. Over the years, workshop hosts have been:

- 2004 AgriService Ethiopia (ASE), Prolinnova–Ethiopia
- 2005 Environmental Alert, Prolinnova–Uganda
- 2006 CEDAC, Prolinnova–Cambodia
- 2007 IED–Afrique, PROFEIS–Senegal
- 2008 ACDEP, Prolinnova–Ghana
- 2009 LI-BIRD, Prolinnova–Nepal
- 2010 ETC Netherlands (then the Prolinnova Secretariat)
- 2011 PELUM–Tz, Prolinnova–Tanzania
- 2012 ADAF–Gallè, Prolinnova–Mali
- 2013 KARI & World Neighbors (WN), Prolinnova–Kenya
- 2014 CEDAC, Prolinnova–Cambodia
- 2015 PANE/Best Practice Association, Prolinnova–Ethiopia
- 2016 Agrecol–Afrique, Prolinnova–Senegal
- 2017 ACDEP, Prolinnova–Ghana
- 2018 Regional meetings: Kenya (Africa) / Philippines (Asia)
- 2019 Agrecol–Afrique, Prolinnova–Senegal
- 2020 African Partners Workshop (online because of Covid-19)
- 2021 IPW online because of Covid-19
- 2022 African Partners Workshop: WN, Prolinnova–Kenya
- 2023 Polokwane, Prolinnova–South Africa
- 2024 WN, Prolinnova–Kenya.

Capacity strengthening is central to Prolinnova. IIRR gave **international training in PID facilitation** in the Philippines in 2004, Uganda 2006, Ethiopia 2007 and Kenya 2009. The participants trained research and

advisory staff in their home countries. With Nuffic funds, the IST gave PID training in Kenya in 2013, Uganda 2014, South Africa 2016, Nepal 2018 and Benin, South Sudan, Sudan & Mozambique 2020–23.

In 2006, PELUM–Tz gave an international **course on policy dialogue**. A mini-workshop on this was held at the 2007 IPW in Senegal. Further training in policy dialogue was given in 2009 in The Netherlands.

A **writeshop on gender issues** in PID, with learning through joint documentation by CP partners, was held in 2008 in Uganda. In 2018–19, with FAO support, a **guide for gender-responsive PID** was developed and tested in Kenya. It is now integrated into regular PID training of the Prolinnova network.

Writeshops on piloting Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs) were held in 2008 in Ghana and 2012 in Mali, and a **writeshop on agroecological intensification** in Burkina Faso in 2018. The outputs were printed and also shared via the Prolinnova website.

An **M&E** framework for tracking local and global Prolinnova results was developed in 2006. An international workshop to learn from the M&E experiences was held in Ethiopia in 2010. With support of Bernard Triomphe, the CPs developed a **participatory impact assessment** guideline for LISFs in 2010.

South–South mentoring between CPs allows mutual learning and strengthens capacities to partner in ARD. In 2012, African advisors facilitated self-assessment of lessons learnt in multistakeholder partnering in Kenya, Tanzania & Uganda. South–South mentoring has increased in recent years with network regionalisation.

Key activities for exchange and learning by farmers and other ARD stakeholders are **Farmer Innovation Fairs (FIFs)** held at local, national and regional level. An Eastern African FIF was held in Nairobi in 2013 and a West African FIF in Ouagadougou in 2015. With A Growing Culture (AGC), Prolinnova held a virtual Global FIF in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic. With support from The 11th Hour Project (Schmidt Family Foundation), PK held an International FIF & Conference in 2024.

Thematic initiatives

CPs with common interests in specific themes have joined forces in several initiatives:

- **Local Innovation Support Funds/Facilities (LISFs).** Action research in Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal, SA, Tanzania & Uganda piloted the channelling of ARD funds to farmer researchers. After start-up support from Promoting Sustainable Development in Agricultural Research Systems (DURAS), Rockefeller Foundation supported Farmer Access to Innovation Resources (FAIR). The Philippines CP adapted LISFs to community innovation funds for climate adaptation.
- **Farmer-led documentation (FLD).** Prolinnova and InsightShare piloted participatory video in Ghana to share local innovations. In 2006, PELUM–Uganda, Prolinnova & Oxfam–Novib held an international FLD workshop in Uganda. FLD was facilitated in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Niger, South Africa (SA) and Sudan. In collaboration with AGC, farmers and NGOs have been trained in using media to share local innovations.
- **HIV/AIDS and PID (HAPID).** In 2008–11 Prolinnova–SA coordinated action research in Mozambique and SA to explore implications of HIV/AIDS for PID and

possibilities of using the approach in working with communities confronted by HIV/AIDS.

- **PID and climate change (CC).** In 2008–10, CPs in Nepal, Ethiopia & Niger studied how farmers innovate in the face of CC. In 2012–14, CPs in Cambodia, India & Nepal promoted local innovation and PID (LINEX–CCA) with Misereor funds. Prolinnova worked with CCAFS (Climate Change, Agriculture & Food Security) on innovation, gender and CC adaptation & mitigation, especially in Cambodia, Kenya, Philippines & Senegal.
- **Community resilience.** In 2012–16, Eastern African CPs, funded by Rockefeller Foundation, strengthened community resilience to change in CLIC-SR (Combining Local Innovative Capacity with Scientific Research).
- **Farmer-led research and agroecology.** In 2014–15, working with the CGIAR Research Programs AAS (Aquatic Agricultural Systems) & CCAFS, Prolinnova explored the impact of farmer-led research. In 2016, field studies deepened knowledge of how this capacity was built. A workshop on farmer-led research in West Africa was held 2015 with CCAFS, CORAF, McKnight Foundation (MF), Misereor and SDC. Since 2015, with MF funds, CPs in Mali and Burkina support farmer research networks for agroecological intensification. Since 2019, Misereor supports research on local innovation in ethnoveterinary medicine in Ghana.
- **Food & nutrition security.** In 2016–19, Prolifans (Promoting local innovation in food & nutrition security), funded by Misereor & coordinated by ACDEP, focused on innovation in growing and processing food, followed by Phases 2 (SULCI-FaNS 2019–22) and 3 (ELI-FaNS 2023–25) in Benin, Burkina, Ghana, Kenya & SA. A similar project is in Cameroon (2022–25). In 2020, Prolinnova began work with DITSL (German Institute for Tropical & Subtropical Agriculture) in NaviNut to explore innovation in childfeeding in Benin & Kenya.
- **Natural resource management.** A Misereor-funded project to promote local innovation in managing water in family farming in the Sahel started in January 2020 and continues to 2026. It is coordinated by AgriBio Services (Senegal) and works in Burkina and Senegal.
- **Institutionalising PID.** Several CPs integrated PID into rural education & training after exchanging course designs and materials at a 2009 workshop in Uganda. Numerous students from the University of Virginia interned with CPs in Africa and Asia in 2014–19. The Nuffic PID training 2013–23 focused on universities & colleges. In 2023, Prolinnova held three webinars on linking with research and universities. It is engaged in the GFAR Collective Action on transformative learning. Institutionalising PID into research, advisory services & education is a core activity in several projects.

Networking, co-learning and policy dialogue

The network shares information through magazines, webinars, Facebook, Twitter, GoogleGroup, website and other e-networks. It produces and disseminates printed publications and links up with other media, e.g. radio, video. It has MoUs with AGC and Access Agriculture. In 2023, Prolinnova joined the Grassroots Agroecology Innovation Network supported by The 11th Hour Project, as well as the Agroecology Coalition that emerged from the United Nations Food Systems Summit.

Prolinnova takes part in many international **ARD fora**. At a 2003 GFAR meeting in Kenya, ASE presented the CP in Ethiopia. At GFAR 2004 in Mexico, Environmental

Alert presented the Ugandan CP. At the 2005 European Forum on ARD in Switzerland, LI-BIRD and Farmer Support Group presented experiences in Nepal and SA. The POG chair spoke on Prolinnova progress to GFAR 2005 in Morocco, and an IST member in 2006 in the USA. In 2006, CEDAC presented Asian experiences to APAARI, as did Prolinnova–Nepal in 2007 and 2016.

Prolinnova experiences were shared at GCARD (Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development) in France (2010), Uruguay (2012) and SA (2016) and at PAEPARD meetings in Europe in 2011 and 2012. In 2015, 4 POG members joined GFAR's Constituent Assembly in Bangkok. Prolinnova is a GFAR partner.

At FARA's 4th General Assembly (GA) in SA in 2007, Prolinnova–SA and Research Into Use (RIU) helped farmers display innovations in posters and videos. In 2010, Mali and Niger partners joined the GA in Burkina.

Prolinnova collaborated with international research centres (CIAT-Africa, IFPRI and ILRI) and IIRR to hold the Innovation Africa Symposium in 2006 in Uganda. In 2009, it co-organised with CIAT-Asia and ICIMOD the Innovation Asia-Pacific Symposium in Nepal.

Several network partners joined the Farmer First Revisited conference 2007 in the UK. Prolinnova was presented at the ISDA (Innovation for Sustainable Development in Agriculture & Food) symposium 2010 in France.

The POG co-chair joined the 1st Global Forum on Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) meeting in Chile in 2010. Partners attended GFRAS meetings in 2011 (Kenya), 2012 (Philippines), 2016 (Cameroon) and 2017 (SA) plus African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS) meetings in 2011, 2017 and 2023 (Nigeria).

Prolinnova took part in EU projects INSARD (Including Smallholders in ARD) and JOLISAA (Joint Learning in Innovation Systems in African Agriculture), which held the Eastern Africa FIF + Agricultural Innovation Systems in Africa Workshop in 2013 in Kenya.

LISF experiences were often presented at, e.g. World Bank Agricultural Innovation Systems Workshop, USA; Coady International Institute, Canada; CTA Brussels Briefing on farmer-driven research, Belgium; McKnight Foundation, USA; GIZ-CGIAR workshop on agricultural innovation, Germany; Agrinatura Science Days, Austria; Expo Milan, Italy; & European Migration Network, Malta.

In 2015, Kenyan farmer innovator Joe Ouko and 3 other Prolinnova members joined the Quaker United Nations Office workshop in Switzerland on Small-scale Farmer Innovation in Biodiverse Systems.

Prolinnova is active in movements for **family farming**, e.g. with World Rural Forum (WRF). In 2018, an IST member spoke on "Putting family farmers at the centre" in the International Symposium on Agricultural Innovation for Family Farmers in FAO and, in 2023, joined the Advisory Committee for FAO's publication *AgriFood Systems Technologies and Innovations Outlook* (ATIO).

Sources of support

After inception funding from IFAD, DGIS was the main donor until 2011. Donors for specific activities included: 11th Hour Project, ActionAid, Agrecol, German Ministry of Food & Agriculture, CIAT, CTA, Brot für die Welt, FAO, Ford Foundation, GFAR, ICRAF, MF, Misereor, Nuffic, RIU, Rockefeller Foundation, SDC, UNDP, World Bank & WorldFish. Network partners cover many own costs but seek funds for new thematic activities & networking.

Some Prolinnova publications

- *Developing technology with farmers: a trainer's guide for participatory learning*. ZED Books, London, 1997 / reprint IIRR, Silang, 2004 (also in Spanish & Arabic)
- *Farmer innovation in Africa: a source of inspiration for agricultural development*. Earthscan, London, 2001.
- *PTD for agricultural improvement: challenges for institutional integration*. IIRR, 2002.
- *Advancing PTD: case studies on integration into agricultural research, extension and education*. IIRR, 2003.
- *IK (Indigenous Knowledge) Notes* (World Bank 2004–06):
70. Ethiopia: a woman innovator speaks
71. Participatory video: rural people document their innovations
72. Regional radio in Tunisia
74. Building MSPs to promote farmer innovation in Ghana
76. Promoting local innovation: enhancing IK dynamics
77. Burkina Faso: indigenous innovation in farmer-to-farmer extension
78. South Africa: smallholder innovation in producing and exporting fruit
85. Innovation Support Funds for farmer-led research
96. Ethiopia: Endogenous and modern innovations
- Participatory approaches to ARD / Farmer innovation as entry point to participatory research and extension / PTD where there is no researcher / Partnerships to promote local innovation. In: *Sourcebook on participatory research and development for sustainable agriculture and NRM*. CIP-UPWARD, 2005
- *Facilitating multistakeholder partnerships*. 2006.
- *Recognising local innovation*. 2008.
- *Innovation Africa*. Earthscan, London, 2008
- Building partnerships to promote local innovation processes. In: *Farmer First Revisited*, London, 2009
- *Farmer-led joint research*. 2010.
- Farmers take the lead in R&D. In: *State of the World 2011: Innovations that nourish the planet*, Worldwatch Inst. NY, 2011.
- *Strengthening local resilience to climate change*. 2011.
- *Farmer-led documentation*. 2011.
- Providing farmers with direct access to innovation funds. In: *Agricultural Innovation Systems*. World Bank. 2012.
- *Farmer Access to Innovation Resources: findings & lessons learnt on facilitating Local Innovation Support Funds*. 2012.
- *Scaling up Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs)*. 2013.
- *Impacts of farmer-led research supported by CSOs*. 2014.
- Farmer governance of local agricultural research and innovation. *The African Technopolitan*. 2016.
- Small-scale farmers' perspectives on what enhances capacity to innovate. IFSA 2016 conference.
- *Small-scale farmer innovation*. Misereor / WeltSichten. 2016.
- *Some guidelines for organising a farmer innovation fair*. 2017.
- *Le projet FaReNe et l'approche participative: les experiences du Mali et du Burkina Faso*. 2019.
- *Collaboration between farmer innovators & formal scientists in PID*. 2019.
- *Supporting local innovation for household food and nutrition security*. 2020.
- *Bringing women innovators to the fore: guidelines for gender-responsive farmer-led innovation and research*. FAO. 2020.
- Several articles appear quarterly in the Prolinnova section of *Appropriate Technology* magazine.

Many of these and other documents related to the themes above can be found at www.prolinnova.net using the Search function.

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